



The Florentine Camerata, the inception of monody and the birth of opera

Sources: Cambridge Guide to Music (ed. Sadie), Wikipedia,
Music from the Renaissance and Baroque (Susanne Dunlap, Columbia University)

The renaissance period is characterised by a new way of thinking by artists, thinkers, writers, musicians and others. Generally acknowledged as starting in fifteenth century Italy, these scholars all felt that some kind of corner had been turned, that the darkness and the dogmatism of the Middle Ages were passing, that a new era in the history of Man and his awareness was dawning. This new era found much of its inspiration in the ancient classics and their values, hence the idea of 'renaissance' 'rebirth'. Such values were particularly focussed on human beings – their individuality and their emotions, as opposed to the medieval preoccupation with the mystical and the divine; the concept of humanism is central to the thinking of the Renaissance.

As the era progressed, there came a reawakened interest in use of the vernacular language (that is to say, the native tongue of Italian) and a feeling that sung music should be easily understood. The polyphony that reached its pinnacle in the earlier part of the sixteenth century, however beautiful, ran counter to this ultimate goal of clear expression. The members of the **Florentine Camerata**, a group of Italian intellectuals at the end of the sixteenth century, felt that listeners would be unable to distinguish the words themselves, let alone be moved by a true perception of the emotional content of a given text. Therefore, they began to think in terms that reversed the prevailing hierarchy of music and text, and to think of the words as the most important part of a vocal work, with the music there simply to support them.

This radical new concept of the way text should be set to music resulted in a completely different musical texture from the polyphony common during the earlier Renaissance. Although there were precedents in accompanied song, nothing that had existed previously was quite the same as the genre of *monody* that resulted from the activities of several members of the Florentine Camerata. This is a crucial factor in the changing styles that started to characterise a new musical era – the Baroque.

Members of the Camerata were of the opinion that music had become corrupt and were concerned with a revival of what they considered to be the 'purer' style of the ancient Greeks. It is from these experimentations that monody and recitative was invented. It was thought that the Greeks used a style between speech and song, and this is what this development produced. This style became primarily linked with the development of opera. It is indeed the formulation of opera in the realm of music that both Florence and the Florentine Camerata are most famous for. Of all revolutions in music history, this one was perhaps the most carefully premeditated: it is one of few examples in music, before the twentieth century, of theory preceding practice.

Monody was simply a single vocal melody accompanied by an instrument that would play chords underneath. This supporting part was the *continuo*, played by any instrument capable of playing chords, such as a keyboard or a lute. Sometimes a viol doubled the bass line. The accompaniment wasn't the only new feature of monody - the melody itself was designed to suit the natural declamation of the text, enhancing natural speech rhythms and accentuation, taking its cue from an orator's delivery rather than from the measured patterns and repetitions of melodic phrases one normally associates with song.

LISTENING EXAMPLE: MONODY

Amarilli, mia bella (1601) Giulio Caccini

<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=8R5F8bD2ZbM>

Although the idea of a single voice singing with a chordal accompaniment may not sound particularly new today, it was a truly revolutionary concept at the time, serving as a catalyst for some of the most important developments in Baroque music. It was such a significant development that its appearance in Florence in the late sixteenth century is commonly considered the beginning of the Baroque period. The far-reaching consequences of this new musical texture included the creation of opera. One voice clearly and movingly



singing text with an accompaniment that did not obscure its sound or meaning suddenly made the creation of an entire drama set to music a real possibility. Although *intermedii* (a genre in which a spoken play was interspersed with songs and dance numbers) existed previously, the first true opera directly resulted from the musical innovations of the Florentine Camerata.

We can see this development of style particularly clearly in Monteverdi's books of madrigals. Towards the end of the fourth book and into the fifth, the traditional piece for five voices started to be transformed into a testing-ground which welcomed instrumental writing and extended sections for vocal trios and duets, or even solo works. We also see the introduction of a completely autonomous instrumental melodic line (i.e., not simply doubling the bass line as the *basso seguente* had done previously), written by the composer himself (not improvised by the instrumentalists), and which, as Giovan Battista Doni wrote in 1635, "since it continues from beginning to end, is usually known as *basso continuo*". It is stated in the frontispiece of the fifth book of madrigals, as well as in the book that Monteverdi himself had had printed for the instrumental bass line only (a first for one of his publications), that this part is for harpsichord, theorbo or other similar instrument, and is required for the last six pieces and optional for the others. The basso continuo accompaniment plays a vital and indispensable part therefore in the musical texture of the final six madrigals, adding a harmonic support to the solo vocal lines without which the piece would be incomplete. These chords were improvised by the instrumentalist above the bass line. The precise instruments to be played were not specified and would have varied according to the availability of performers and the musical and expressive effects desired.

LISTENING EXAMPLE: A LATE MONTEVERDI MADRIGAL
Ahi, come a un vago sol Claudio Monteverdi
[Naxos 8.555311, Track 14](#)

Monteverdi combined this new style with song-like movements, dances and instrumental interludes to form the beginning of the genre we now know as opera. Perhaps his most influential work, *Orfeo*, is particularly close to the genre we recognise today. Its engaging mixture of types of music and concern with dramatic development did much to set the tone for many works that followed.

See also [Orfeo](#).

Perhaps even more than the creation of opera, the new musical texture introduced through monody ushered in an aesthetic that valued contrast and juxtaposition over seamless uniformity. Compare, for instance, one of Giovanni Gabrieli's colourful polychoral motets with Palestrina motets and masses. Although Palestrina's music is certainly not monochromatic, compared with Gabrieli's music its changes sound gradual and subtle. Gabrieli juxtaposes short sections that contrast vividly in terms of their performing forces (solo voice vs. double chorus; instrumental interlude vs. vocal monody) and style (free declamation vs. rhythmically regular, songlike moments).

Renaissance music was all about continuity, restraint and subtlety; Baroque music sought to evoke strong emotional responses in listeners and to surprise and pique their interest. This principle was called *varietas*, and it remained one of the central features of Baroque music throughout the seventeenth century.